Speak English or Die? Page Against the Machine on Anarchist Translation and Decolonial Publishing in Indonesia

Indonesian publishing collective Page Against the Machine talk about their project to translate anarchist texts into English and their Crowdfunder for production costs.

By On

Page Against the Machine is a small publishing collective in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Having already translated numerous English-language titles into Indonesian, they are now turning the neo-colonial tide and sparking an initiative to translate key Indonesian anarchist texts into English. They're currently running a Crowdfunder appeal trying to raise £2,250 for production costs, please support them if you can.

Our correspondent, Dickhead Bidge, had a chat with the PATM collective to find out more about the project and the significance of their mission to share Indonesian anarchist thought with the wider world.

Anarchism in Indonesia has had at least some attention in English-language sources in recent years, but for those maybe aren't so familiar, what can you tell us about it?

OK, well, to give you a glimpse into the history of anarchism in Indonesia…

The contemporary anarchist movement in Indonesia began to resurge in the 1990s after being oppressed and dismantled for thirty years by the New Order regime led by military general Soeharto. During his dictatorship, all leftist movements were crushed, and negative propaganda about communism and other leftist ideologies was rampant. The resurgence of anarchism was made possible by the student movement across Indonesia and particularly by punk culture. Punk communities learned about anarchism through the lyrics of punk bands involved in anarchist movements, as well as from anarchist punk zines from the United States and Europe, which were then copied, translated, and redistributed. In subsequent years, anarchist discourse has become increasingly diverse; influencing activists, students, workers, and eventually reaching a broader audience.

Within and beyond the development of these groups and networks, anarchists have been involved in various actions, such as running infoshops; publishing books, pamphlets, and zines; as well as solidarity actions with local communities; boycotts and sabotage actions; demonstrations and black blocs;

and interventions in the form of artistic works. Several important factions of this movement have also been involved in providing support for urban workers, rural farmers, and communities suffering from land dispossession and environmental destruction.

The proliferation of street libraries [or Perpustakaan Jalanan] developed in Bandung from 2009 and then spread to other regions, and that widespread uptake is indicative of the movement's focus on education. These libraries also provide free food through public kitchens organised under the umbrella of Food Not Bombs. The website Anarkis.org, established in 2014, has also become an important resource for self-education and critical discussions related to the movement. The feminist anarchist collective Needle 'n' Bitch, which has been active since 2010, also actively provides safe spaces for women and queers, organises workshops, and publishes zines specifically within the feminist realm of the anarchist movement in Indonesia.

Indonesia is an enormous country, with a lot of diversity, so obviously the recent history of anarchism here is really complex—but that's it in a nutshell!

So, what's particular about anarchism in Indonesia that makes it important for people elsewhere in the world to read about it?

Translation and publication of Indonesian anarchist literature into English is important for several reasons. In the context of the global exchange of ideas and perspectives, this effort sheds light on the unique development of anarchism in Indonesia, a so-called ‘developing’ country, and contrasts it with the predominantly European and American narratives.

European colonialism profoundly influenced Indonesian language and literature. During the colonial period, they imposed their languages and literary forms on Indonesian societies, and this influence still continues. European and American literatures have historically dominated the global stage due to their privileged positions. This dominance has led to an imbalance in the global spread and reception of anarchist literature too, with non-Western perspectives often marginalised or overlooked. Translating Indonesian anarchist and critical literature helps to rectify this imbalance, offering a platform for voices from less privileged regions.

How relevant is the ‘classical’ anarchist tradition for the Indonesian context?

Classical anarchism was (and is) framed through European and American lenses, with notable figures and movements shaping the discourse. These perspectives often carry their own cultural biases and assumptions. Indonesian anarchist literature introduces different viewpoints that challenge the dominance of European and American narratives., because it emerges from a context marked by post-colonial struggles, stark economic disparities, and indigenous practices. Understanding these differences highlights how anarchism adapts and evolves in diverse environments and reveals the distinct ways in which it addresses local issues.

The texts we are translating provide insights into how anarchist principles are interpreted and practiced in Indonesia, as influenced by indigenous peoples and local struggles. Readers will begin to understand the distinctiveness of Indonesian anarchism, but also how it interacts with Western interpretations.

It’s not just about making texts accessible; it’s about enriching the global discourse on anarchism, challenging dominant narratives, and acknowledging the complex interplay of colonial legacies. We’re contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of anarchist movements worldwide by highlighting the distinct contributions of Indonesian thinkers and activists.

Tell us a bit about the Page Against the Machine collective.

Page Against the Machine is a small independent publisher, informed by anarchist traditions of self-publishing and DIY production. In previous projects we’ve published 30+ books on art and socio-political themes. We’ve also archived over 1,000 books and zines on anarchism and politics that have been collected since the 1990s.

The team is pretty streamlined, just three of us—but with a lot of experience and skills. This new initiative is to translate anarchist texts and other critical social thought into English (for all the reasons elaborated above).

One of our key objectives is to elevate the narratives from non-academic writers who are firsthand witnesses to events. We like those narratives that are presented without the constraints of academic writing styles. It's perhaps even more important here in Indonesia—a lot of writers and activists simply do not possess writing skills that are deemed 'sufficient' by the standards of formal education, and, as a result, many critically-minded individuals struggle to communicate their experiences. Their knowledge and their emotional responses aren't expressed, simply due to technical writing challenges. Our publications seek to address this by providing a platform for voices, directly from the grassroots.

We organise as a co-operative, collectively managed under solidarity principles, and we share access to resources, means of production, and benefits. Moving forward, we plan to expand the initiative and collaborate with local authors and publish a greater number of texts focusing on critical literature, social struggles, feminism, anarchism, and queer topics.

Anarkisme & Sindikalisme dalam Pergerakan Antikolonial hingga Revolusi Indonesia (1908-1948)
[Anarchism & Syndicalism in the Anti-colonial Movement to the Indonesian Revolution 1908-1948]
book by the now incarcerated Indonesian anarchist Bima Satria Putra

What sort of activist backgrounds inform your current project?

Page Against the Machine is an initiative by three people: Mila, Mita, and Muhee. We are friends and comrades who have known and collaborated with each other for a long time across various forms of activism. Mila and Mita are part of an anarchist feminist collective based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which has been actively engaged for over a decade in activism related to feminism, anarchism, queer, ecology, and the land struggle.

In addition to our activism, Mita and Mila have a strong interest in literacy and the world of publishing. We are both zine makers and zine enthusiasts, and regularly write and translate anarchist, feminist and queer texts. Mita has translated several hefty anarchist works into Indonesian, including *Anarchism and Other Essays* by Emma Goldman, *What is Anarchist Communism?* by Alexander Berkman, *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide* by Ruth Kinna, and numerous anarchist pamphlets.

And last but not least, Muhee is a member of a collective space in Yogyakarta which is a critical art collective that actively supports social issues through various artistic mediums, including art, music, and performance. Muhee is an artist and graphic designer with experience in the field of publishing. Previously, Muhee managed a publishing house, mastering technical skills of design, artwork, layout, and book printing.

Why are you doing a Crowdfunder? What kind of support are you asking for?

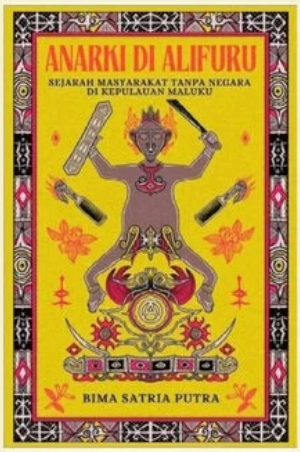
For Indonesian anarchist literature to reach a broader audience, financial support is essential. Publishing and distributing books, journals, and other written materials require resources that many Indonesian anarchist publishers and authors simply do not have. The money we're hoping to raise will cover costs including production, translation, marketing, workspace rent, working equipment, and distribution. This support is crucial for making our works accessible to global readers.

The total we're aiming for with the Crowdfunder is £2,250. To break that down a bit:

1. Initial production cost for first books: 15.000.000 IDR / £735
2. Translator, editor, lay-out wage for first books: 15.000.000 / £735
3. Working equipment—scanner and printer: 4.000.000 IDR / £190
4. Yearly workspace rent: 12.000.000 IDR / £590

The Crowdfunder also has a 'stretch target' of £3,000, which would allow us to move onto the next books more quickly and start to expand the project.

The initial financial hurdles are hard to overcome for us here in Indonesia, so that's why we're inviting people elsewhere (probably the people who'll end up reading these books!) to support us, to help get us started.



Anarchy in Alifuru:
The History of Stateless Societies in the Maluku Islands
by Bima Satria Putra

To Farm is to resist!
by Widodo

RED BLACK CITY*: A Journey through Anarchism in Semarang* by Pujo Nugroho

What are the three books you're currently working on? Why did you pick those books in particular?

The first is *Anarchy in Alifuru: the history of stateless societies in the Maluku Islands* by Bima Satria Putra—he's an author who has done a lot to highlight the anarchistic aspects of the numerous indigenous cultures across the Indonesian archipelago. It's a really effective counter to the idea that anarchism is a Western import to Indonesia, and, by translating it into English, we're getting a new and unfamiliar perspective out there. Bima is also currently incarcerated by the Indonesian state, so any proceeds that come from this publication can be used to support him in prison.

The next one is *To Farm Is To Resist* by Widodo. Widodo died recently, so this one's really important to us for that reason especially. He was an activist with the Paguyuban Petani Lahan Pantai [or Association of Coastal Farmers] in Kulon Progo—they've been fighting against a mining operation that would totally destroy their traditional coastal farming techniques. This destructively extractivist approach to natural resources in Indonesia has been going on since colonial times, but it persists now, and people do what they can to resist the might of the corporations (who are assisted by the police and state, of course). So, like the first book, publishing this into English gets Widodo's particular experience out into the world. It will probably resonate with a lot of readers who are resisting neoliberal extractivism on their own doorsteps, but, importantly, it tells a particular story about contemporary struggle here in Indonesia.

The third one is *Red Black City: a journey through anarchism in Semarang* by Pujo Nugroho. This book provides a history of the anarchist movement in Indonesia, and connects it to the contemporary upswelling of anarchism. The particular focus is on anti-colonial and anarcho-syndicalist organising in the city of Semarang during the early twentieth century. There is a lot of confusion about what anarchism means here in Indonesia—this book takes readers on a journey through time to understand that the anarchist movement has a long pedigree in Indonesia, and to defend it from the pejorative accusations made it against it in mainstream discourse today (usually by people who don't know what they're talking about!).

So, all three books together provide a nice cross section of what makes anarchist thought from Indonesia such an important contribution to the global anarchist dialogue. We've already made a good start on translation, but yeah, we need some support to keep the work going!

You can follow PATM on Instagram and support their Crowdfunder; we also recommend checking out CrimethInc.'s latest interview with Indonesian anarchists following the August 2024 wave of anti-government protests.

Dickhead Bidge

Dickhead Bidge, as an anarchist vegan bike punk, ticks several of the required boxes (while railing against the squeezing of people into boxes, of course). They live in a green place where the land we call Europe meets the water we call the Atlantic.

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